

His experience of God was central and decisive in Jesus' life. The itinerant prophet of God's reign, the healer of the sick and defender of the poor, the poet of mercy and teacher of love, the creator of a new movement in service to the reign of God, is not a dilettante attracted by different interests, but a person profoundly integrated by one core experience: God, the Father of all. It is God who inspires his message, integrates his intense activity, and polarizes his energies. God is at the center of this life. Jesus' message and activity can only be explained in terms of this radical, lived experience of God. To forget that is to lose the authenticity and deepest meaning of Jesus' life. Without it the figure of Jesus is distorted, his message devalued, his actions severed from the meaning he gave them¹.

But what is Jesus' experience of God? Who is God for him? How does he relate to God's mystery? How does he listen and trust in God's goodness? How does he live it? There are no easy answers to these questions. Jesus is very discreet about his inner life. But he speaks and acts in such a way that we can at least partly discern his experience from his words and actions².

One thing is evident right away. Jesus does not propose a doctrine of God. He never explains his idea of God. For Jesus, God is not a theory. God is an experience that transforms him, and shows him a fuller, more loving, happier life for everyone. He never tries to replace the traditional doctrine of God with a new one. His God is the God of Israel: the one Lord, creator of the heavens and the earth, savior of his beloved people, the nearby God of the Covenant in whom the Israelites believe. He has no debates with any Jewish group about God's goodness, his closeness to the people, or his liberating action. They all believe in the same God.

The difference is that the religious leaders identify God with their religious system, and not with the happiness and the life of the people. For them the first and most important thing is to worship God by observing the law, respecting the sabbath, and honoring the temple worship. In contrast, Jesus identifies God

1 Modern scholarship has unfortunately failed to explore Jesus' religious experience in depth. Seeking to avoid tangential discussions of his psychology, or confessional debates over his nature as Son of God, many scholars have neglected one indisputable historical fact: Jesus' activity was motivated by his experience of God, and he invited his hearers and followers to believe and accept God with the same trust he had. Jesus' relationship with God caused a deep impression in his followers.

2 Naturally, our historical approximation of Jesus cannot possibly prejudge what Church doctrine affirms and christology studies with regard to Jesus' filial and messianic consciousness, nor about the unique relationship of the incarnate Son of God with the Father in his unrepeatable singularity, nor about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of attributing faith to Jesus Christ, and the meaning of that faith. Such questions simply lie outside the field of historical research.